

Karmic triad of the Geeta (Karma, Akarma and Vikarma)

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In order to liberate Arjuna from the state of indecisiveness regarding his course of action Sri Krushna has explained about three different types of actions; those are namely; karma, akarma and vikarma. ¹ These three types of karmas are found in the form of a triad which can be treated as the karmic triad of the Bhagabad Geeta. In a general sense it is found as:

Karma (right action)

Vikarma (wrong action) →out of these two the knowledge of

Akarma (Inaction) springs up

It is seen that there has been no discussion about the distinction between voluntary action and non- voluntary action. Such a distinction is warranted only when someone is to learn the distinction between purposive and non- purposive actions. Many actions are performed without having any purpose and those insignificant from moral standpoint. Since such actions are ethically non- significant the non-mentioning of voluntary and non-voluntary distinction in the Geeta does not matter at all. But there has been the mentioning of the distinction between right action and wrong action, which is ethically quite important issue. Besides the distinction between the right and wrong actions there has been mentioning of a third category of action, on which the ethical and spiritual importance has been attached to a great extent in the Geeta. The third one is considered as the highest category of action. Scholars have tried to equate this third category of action with *naiskarmya* , *karma sanyasa*, *niskarma karma*, etc.

Textually considering regarding these three types of actions it has been said that very often wise men are unable to find out ‘what is action?’ and ‘what is inaction?’. So there has been the necessity of knowing about karma (action) akarma (inaction) and vikarma (popularly known as forbidden action or prohibited action)(IV /16&17).

In this context it has been said that the best possible test can be, one should be able to see action in inaction and inaction in action. In the following verses the method of identifying such intellect has been given in the following manner:

Whose understanding is free from desire and inclination for worldly objects shares such intellect.

Who has given up all attachment to actions as well as to its results, shares such intellect.

Who has control over his mind and body to dispel all kinds of carvings, share, such intellect.

Who has a balanced mind and not to be affected in joy or grief, shares such intellect.

It is pity that *how* action can be seen in inaction and inaction in action has not been spelt out in the text although *who* can see it has been spelt out in the above mentioned manner.

However at least this is clear from the above mentioned conditions that the following are the necessary factors in order to qualify to understand the distinction between karma and akarma. There should be full control over mind as body, no inclination for worldly objects, no concern for the results of action, and should not have been affected by joy and grief. If someone attends this state of intellect he is fully capable of distinguishing the different types of karmas. This is how there has been the mentioning of who can easily distinguish among the different types of karmas. But since more has not been stated about the details regarding karma and akarma and vikarma we find different types of renderings by various scholars. To those various renderings we can put under three models in the following manner.

(a) Socialistic model

(b) Idealistic model

(c) Theological model

(a) The socialistic model:- In one model, the initiation for performing the action happens to be an important factor of the distinction. In this type emphasis has been attached on the higher good or the social good. It is treated as a 'socialistic model' to which Mahatma Gandhi and pandit Neelakantha Das seem to have adopted.

(b) An idealistic Model:- In another model the wrong-action or the forbidden action has not been into account. Here all the three karmas are various stages of a process of attaining the higher order of action. Vinoba's interpretation of Geeta fits very much to this model.

(c) A theological model:- In another model maximum importance has been attached on God in order to distinguish between various types of actions. Most of the religious monks have adopted this model. In this project the views of Yogananda and Kriyananda has been taken into consideration.

The socialistic model

First of all Neelakantha points out that knowing the right action is very much essential. The random action disturbs the *lokasangraha*. In order to protect the social harmony right actions are essential. Anybody cannot perform right action. In order to perform right action one must have basic knowledge on right actions. In the Vedas there is the mentioning of two important types of karmas, namely, *yajnartha karmas* and *purusartha karmas*. The *yajnartha karmas* are performed for higherhood as the *purusartha karmas* are performed for self-good. The *purusartha karmas* provide satisfaction to senses. One who has no knowledge about this distinction he cannot perform right actions. He can perform karma but that won't lead to akarma. It shows that all akarmas are karmas and karmas of special category. Here karma is free from attachment (*anasakta*). If it is not free from attachment it is mere karma, but not random action. It is generally called right action because it is linked with the duty of the agent. It must be duty-linked action. It is neither non-valuntary/non-moral nor a-moral actions. It comes under the purview of moral actions. The a-moral actions belong to a separate category which are forbidden actions. According to some thinkers it refers to vikarma which has been mentioned in the fourth chapter, 17th verse.

It is seen that Neelakantha Das has explained the Gandhian stand by saying that one who performs but does not take the pride that he could be able to do that, his action is as good as inaction. Further one poses that he is doing nothing but calculates everything with in, his pose of inaction is his karma. Not to take initiative for doing anything is akarma. To take initiative for doing something is karma. Normally this distinction comes to the mind. But actually it is not the proper distinction in the context of the Geeta. For him vikarma stands for such action that man is prepared to forego. The intentional or purposive work (asakta) is karma and action without attachment (*anasakta*) is akarma.

According to Gandhi the performance of the duty ceaselessly refers to karma and cease to work leads to akarma. He has tried to show that "...of a person doing no karma even when occupied in karma and of another who, though he believes that he is doing no karma, is in fact weaving the bonds of karma round himself." ²Gandhi makes it clear by saying that "Karma becomes relatively akarma when it is undertaken for the service of the others, for the sake our higher good." ³ "He who does everything for the sake of higher good and dedicates all his work to god has ceased from karma."⁴ Certain expressions sometimes create confusion regarding the exact understanding of karma and akarma. For example, Gandhi considers akarma to be performance of karma 'for the sake of our higher good' and also 'cease to work lead to akarma'. Then what does it mean to say that 'cease to work lead to akarma' probably here he refers from performing *purusartha karmas* one can proceed towards akarma. Here karma and akarma appear to be contrary terms and actually there is the relation of class exclusion from one perspective in this manner.

Right action (karma) +attachment (asakti) =karma.

Right action (karma) +detachment (anasakta) = akarma.

In both the cases karma is there as common factor and attachment and detachment is found as contrary factor .That is why Gandhi says 'karma becomes relatively akarma' if undertaken for higher good

The Idealistic model

Acharya Vinoba Bhave has given a different view in respect of the various types of karmas as mentioned in the Geeta. According to Vinoba, in the Geeta, karma has been used in the sense of *svadharma* or the duty. It is known that we perform certain regular karmas like eating, breathing, sleeping, etc. Since regarding these regular activities no doubt or moral questions can be raised there is no necessity of explaining these karmas. These karmas are automatic and need no further explanation. Further explanations required only in respect the karmas those fall under the scope of moral consideration. Taking moral aspect into account karma stands for the duty of a being. Vinoba has used a nice example to explain the duty of a business-man. It is the duty of a business-man to sale the *svadeshi* (country made) products. If instead of sailing the *svadeshi* products the business man sales foreign goods then he is away from his duties (karmas), because he is interested in obtaining more profit. Thus performance of *svadharma* or duty is karma according to Vinoba.

Vinoba further considers that there must be the harmony between the action and the intention of the being. If there is perfect harmony between the action and the intention of the agent then it leads to *vikarma*. It is treated to be higher order because of the harmony between

auction and the real intention of the agent. Here also an example can be given to explain the harmony between the action and the intention. Suppose some one met one old teacher before him. As practice one wishes the teacher by nodding the head. But if in his mind he was unwilling to bow his head but for the sake of courtesy nodded his head then here the action is not in harmony with his mind or intention. So it is not *vikarma*.

According to Vinoba when karma is linked with *vikarma* it involves the desirelessness. Because if the agent does not perform the *svadharma* formally without taking his heart and mind into account then it will become dry karma and it will be as good as hypocrisy. So with the sanction of heart and mind the karma (*svadharma*) become, *vikarma*. *Niskama* is the product of the togetherness of karma and *vikarma*.

Vinoba further maintains that when karma and akarma are fused not only *niskama* is found as a product it also leads to akarma. Akarma need not be understood as no-karma. Akarma has to be understood in a special way that here the agent performs the action but he does not bear the burden of performing the action. Here one acts but he has never felt the pressure of performing the act for which reason it is as good as inaction. Hence inaction does not stand for the absence of action, but it refers to lightness and obviousness of the action as if it is as good as inaction. It may be understood as effort-less action. Whatever effort is involved cannot be treated to be significant in the sense, since it is his duty and he has been very much habituated with his work and his heart and mind is involved in doing the work, he has utilized the minimum possible effort to actualize the action. It is the reason it can be considered as inaction or akarma.

Let me give one example to understand such a stand of Vinoba that one can perform some act without bearing the pressure of the action. An instructor, who is very much trained in weight lifting; while giving demonstration to the students demonstrates the lifting very casually and the act he exhibits is found as a very perfect action of lifting. Here the instructor has enough enthusiasm to give instruction for which in his karma the *vikarma* has been fused. If he would have given demonstration just for the sake of his job without having any interest in it, even while giving demonstration he would have got the pressure of the action of lifting. His much interest and enthusiasm in giving the demonstration makes the act so light that he does not get the pressure of the work at all. Here his karma and *vikarma* has been fused and resulted in akarma according to Vinoba. The action-hood of the action evaporates in this state for which reason it can be considered as akarma. In the context of the Geeta, Sri Krishna says that even if you will kill them in this war, if in your action the karma (duty) and *vikarma* (purity of mind) are fused then you will not be treated as the killer; here you will be treated as *akarta* (passive performer of the duty bound action) and the action will be treated as akarma or inaction.

This explanation of Vinoba makes it clear how inaction can be viewed in action and action can be treated as inaction. He has cited the example of the actions of Sri Rama (of the *Ramayana*) can be treated to be *akarma*. Whatever he was performing, he was performing without being attached with it. He was performing as his duty and performing involving his heart and mind.

In this interpretation of Vinova the emphasis has been attached on three factors. Those are:
the individual does not feel that he is the sole agent or the doer.
the individual does not feel the strain of the action, however bulky the action may be.
the work does not bind the individual in any manner.

It is known that the usual nature of karma is that it binds the performer in some way. The significant acts of the being bind him in some way or other. The ordinary insignificant acts of a being do not bind him at all. In the *Isa Upanisad* it has been said that having no other alternative man performing works (of daily life) and desire to live for hundred years whereby such actions do not bind them. How the action binds a man can be well understood by taking an example. Suppose a man constructs a big temple, this act of him binds him in several ways. He may take the pride that he has constructed a temple. He may become worried to manage the temple in a better way. He may attempt to attract more and more devotees to his temple etc. But every human being performs works like eating, taking, walking every day but such acts never bind them in any way. It shows that acts bind human beings where the actions are performed with attachment. But when karma is combined with *vikarma*, according to Vinoba's understanding, it does not bind the being. Because though the individual acts but he is not considered as the actual doer.

It is seen that some scholars appreciate Vinoba's interpretation, even though it has not been supported by many number of commentators. For example, S.K. Mohanty supports Vinoba's interpretation of *vikarma* as to mean the sense of detachment characteristic of pure action'. He writes "Gita mentions the word but does not elaborate on its meaning. But from the context of its mention and discussion that follows makes it more plausible to accept Vinobaji's interpretation. Further it would be more in accord with the spirit of synthesis and in its effort to achieve this it interprets and uses terms in novel ways. It tune with that spirit, we can end by noting that although *akarma* and *vikarma* are ordinarily used in negative senses, the Gita uses these two notions to bring to height the positive, innovative and constructive aspects of detachment and purity of action".⁵

It may be pointed out here that in Vinoba's interpretation we do not find the three names of karma stand for three types of karmas. Because Vinoba considers that if heart and mind is put to any action then it becomes *vikarma*. S.K. Mohanty points out that action without the sense of attachment or pure-action is *vikarma*. But this understanding (later) of him (Mohanty) does not seem to be very much consistent with his earlier understanding that in *vikarma* there is inner purity, where the agent seems not to act and does not feel the burdern of action. Here we do not find that both the explanations affirm the same description. Rather his earlier view seems to be very much clear that it is found to be consistent with what has been mentioned earlier (by me) in order to explain Vinoba's stand. Since the agent does not feel the burden of the action we have mentioned it as 'no-action', whereas Mohanty puts it as 'pure-action'. Here we do not find sufficient reason to consider it as 'pure action' in the sense that if *vikarma* becomes the pure-action then what would be the status of *akarma*? In any case the negative sense of *vikarma* cannot be denied completely. Because in the *vikarma* the agent does not get the burdern of the action happens to be its negative aspect. *Vikarma* in *Vinoba's* stand appears to be both positive and negative in the sense it is positive as the involvement of the heart and mind to an act and there is no burden of the act links with the negative aspect. However, the triad of Vinoba appears as action, no-action and inaction.

(*karma, vikarma and akarma*) does not appear to be fully satisfactory. So, it is not possible to agree with Mohanty that it is more plausible to accept Vinobaji's interpretation'.

Further in Vinoba's explanation *vikarma* does not appear to refer to any category of action rather to some kind of attitude of the agent. It is worth questioning that if *karma* stands for duty then should there be any necessity of involving the heart and mind to it? If duty has to be performed for the sake of duty then putting heart and mind into it becomes redundant. If the action is to be performed for the sake of duty it would neither be pure nor impure. It would be neutral. So if *vikarma* is understood either as no-action or as pure-action then it would be difficult to consider *karma* to be duty in Vinoba's model. Since the status of *vikarma* is not suitably explained in Vinoba's model it would be difficult to accept that the interpretations given by Vinoba for *karma, vikarma and akarma* to be consistent with the spirit of the Geeta, that advocates neutral morality.

It is seen that Vinoba has tried to give a new line of thinking in case of the understanding of the terms *karma, akarma and vikarma*. His explanations along with the examples has become quite consistent within his frame-work of thought. But what is wrong with him is that he has stipulated the meaning to all the three terms in his own way for which there seems to have no scope for the independent interpretation. Only the term *vikarma* has not been clarified in the Geeta. But the two other terms are used so extensively that the stipulation of new understanding would be arbitrary. This has become the case in case of Vinoba's interpretation. Where stipulation of new meaning is not allowed he has stipulated new meaning to it. Further in his understanding *akarma* refers to an attitude only, not to a category of action. But *akarma* cannot be an attitude of mind. It refers to positively a category of action.

The Theological model.

The Bhagavad Geeta is such a text, in which not only the scholars of philosophy have shown their interest but people of several categories have shown their interest. Among them a large number of spiritual leaders have written commentaries on the Geeta, which are also acclaimed as 'monument work' or 'masterpiece.....work' by various sources. It is seen that Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda's commentary has received much appreciation as 'spiritual, literary, and philosophical work'. In this background it is felt proper to mention his views in respect of *karma, vikarma and akarma*.

To, this triad Yogananda has expressed as 'right action', 'wrong action' and 'inaction'. To inaction he considers to be freedom from action which I shall discuss later. First of all he makes the distinction between the right action and wrong action with the understanding the 'God-directed actions' are different from 'actions performed with ego consciousness'. In both these categories of actions the agent is conscious about that he is performing the action keeping either the divine consciousness in mind or the self – consciousness in mind. If the divine consciousness is in the mind then the action can be treated to be liberation oriented. If it is to satisfy the ego then it comes under the lower

category of work where the agent is not free from the karmic bondage. Hence Yogananda says that it is the discriminating intention and the self control behind the action that determines whether it leads towards 'liberation or to karmic slavery'. In this sense actions, in themselves, have no meaning. It is the intention behind the action that is important to decide the rightness or wrongness of the act. He has explained this by taking an example of this sort. In respect of the act of eating we can have two types of actions referring to two types of intentions behind the act.

(i) In one category the agent considers that eating is also a God-directed duty to be performed religiously in order to provide necessary strength to the body which is the temple of his soul. Here this action is treated to be the right action as behind the action self-control is there and the agent only consumes that much which is the need for his body for sustenance. In another category the agent wants to satisfy his sense through selecting foods suits to his taste. He is not concerned about the limit to his diet. In order to please his sense he can go for over eating. This action of the agent is treated as wrong action and leads to karmic slavery.

Like the case of eating, many more occasions are there where the agent tries please his ego, by becoming a slave to music, listening to flattery, etc. On the other hand one may prefer to listen the spiritual music or devotional chants to purify his mind and remain away from egotism. Thus, for Yogananda a wise man "uses all of his sense only for divine enjoyment, harnessing these wild stallions to lead the car of his life to spiritual freedom".⁶

Thus, according to Yogannada "when the action performed tends to arouse soul consciousness it may be called proper action (right action). All activities that lead the mind of the doer away from sense enslavement to soul enjoyment are proper action..... Any action harmful to body, mind, or soul is contrary or wrong action, and is to be avoided"⁷

In respect of inaction he considers that here the agent performs actions only to please God. Here the agent is unconcerned if he is having any type of desire behind the action. Such types of actions are possible in the part of liberated yogis, like Mahavatar Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya, Sri Yuktesvarji, and many other great spiritual masters. Here it may be pointed out that though Yogananda considers inaction to be the stage of desirelessness in actuality it is not purely a state of desirelessness. It is free from all other desires except the 'desire to please God'. The desire to please God through action is inaction.

Swami Kriyananda, a disciple of Yogananda, has given an understanding of the three types of actions in a different manner. He has translated *karma*, *vikarma* and *akarma* as right action, wrong actions and inaction. In respect of the right actions he distinguishes between the spiritually right action and relatively right actions. He considers that the actions oriented towards soul-freedom along with the understanding that God is acting through him are spiritually right action. He writes: "Right action, spiritually speaking, is action with that attitude which leads to soul-freedom. That attitude includes non-attachment to the fruits of action, and acting with consciousness that God is acting through one. Action, that is inspired by His consciousness and energy, with the results given to him without any ego involvement, is right action".⁸

Besides the spiritually right actions, relatively right actions are possible in our day to day livings. He has made it clear that those actions give us material benefits or those pleases human beings cannot be treated to be right actions. But some actions can relatively be treated to be right action if those are performed aiming at self – improvement (physically, or

emotionally or mentally). Human beings make effort to develop their will power or their power of concentration or even 'to acquire the clarity of thought', etc.. Those can be treated to be relatively right actions.

Vikarma has been considered as wrong action by him. Actions performed being charged with selfishness or out of pride to nourish the ego are wrong actions. He says that the mixtures of relatively right and wrong actions are very frequent in this world. Man is unable to make himself free from ego-considerations. So most of his actions become mixture of right and wrong actions leading to complexities. This creates obstacle in the path of spiritual development.

In respect of *akarma* (inaction) he also considers it in two ways. Those are the complete inaction and seeming inaction. He has referred to the earlier stanzas to explain that the complete inaction is an impossibility. So there is the necessity of knowing which one *seem* to be inaction. For him 'with right action, true inaction is possible in God alone'.

In his understanding, we all are aiming at spiritual evolution, where the ego is to attain the state of being one with the Cosmic consciousness. If the individual is acting in this direction then his action is right action or karma. "And anything that affirms the ego or that blocks any effort to sublimate it is wrong action. And that which saps, or which other wise dulls any effort at ego-sublimation, is inaction". 9

He has not explained how one can view inaction in action and action in inaction. But he has explained about the relative relationship between right and wrong actions. He says that it is seen that actions are performed with wrong motives and yet considered as good actions (probably taking the consequence of action into account).¹⁰ It is possible because all actions are relative in nature. 'What is good for one person may be bad for another'. In this perspective he suggests that it is better not to perform action than performing the so-called good actions.

He has used two examples to explain how goodness of all actions is relative by nature. The first one is that if a person like Gandhi or Jesus would have declared that it is enough; 'from now on I want to work hard and become a millionaire' then it would be treated as 'that man has fallen'. But if the same declaration is made by a lazy and idle person who was not doing any work previously, then it will be treated to be right and good'.

The second one is that if a ditch is digged it involves only physical labour. This action can be treated to be good, bad or self- stultifying depending upon the attitude behind the work.

From these above two examples he has arrived at the view that if the action is performed 'to please God' then it is in the direction of 'spiritual freedom'. If the action is performed to please the ego then it is a case of 'ego-bondage'.

Here Kriyananda has taken attempt to give a theological understanding about the different types of karmas but he has not expressed those in traditional orthodox way, that is recommending something to be unchallengeable and impress upon others to accept it. Rather

he has tried to explain it by the help of examples so that one can grasp it prior to its acceptance. But however effort may be made in a theological frame work the removal of obscurity becomes a hard task. This is also the case with Kriyananda.

References

- 1 *Srimad Bhagavad Geeta, Chapter IV, 16 &17*
- 2 *Gandhi, M.K., The Bhagavadgita Orient Paper backs, 2003, p.130*
- 3 *Ibid ,p.131*
- 4 *Ibid ,p.132*
- 5 *Mohanty, S.K. 'Karma, Akarma and vikarma in the Gita'. Proceedings of Fourteenth Conference of AOPA,2002,p.17*
- 6 *Yogannada, The Bhagad Gita ,Vol 1 Yoganada Satsanga Society of India,p467*
- 7 *Ibid ,pp.466-467*
- 8 *Kriyananda,The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita, Ananda Sangha Publications, p. 189.*
- 9 *Ibid , P.190*
- 10 *Bracketed expressions are my addition*